Some Issues through the Research of Regional Rangaku

TSUKAMOTO Manabu

Whereas there are some scholars who are of the opinion that there was a strong consciousness of criticizing and opposing feudal ideologies in turning toward Rangaku and Western studies while others assert that their role can be reduced to a reinforcement of the feudal system, research into regional Rangaku may well present issues that fall outside this framework.

People living in the regions were far away from the three urban centers of Kyoto, Edo and Osaka and had few opportunities to engage in arts and science. Nonetheless, they held a deep admiration for Western sciences and technologies that came to Japan via Holland and indeed we must consider the significance of their dedication to such studies. Many of these were physicians, and we have come to think that they were mainly village physicians, who faced a diverse range of challenges and would not allow themselves to live a life estranged from the people amongst whom they lived.

With regard to learning that originated in China, on the other hand, there was a time when this led to an interest in Japanese culture and science and people all over the country were encouraged to participate in this style of learning. This special interest in Japan also gave rise to a way of thinking that led to an anti-foreign nationalism.

Under these circumstances, the people who became increasingly interested in Rangaku were perhaps driven more by the pursuit of facts than by practical application for their clinical work or out of a desire to uncover universal truths. The spirit that urged new experiments by physicians of Chinese medicine was a response that did not contradict either an interest in Western learning or an interest in the special features of regions. The thirst for knowledge that was cultivated all over Japan during this period appears simple at first glance, but we should once again be amazed by these people who, while referring to plants and other objects using their local dialect, were also engrossed in German medical books.